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AUTHOR	Buffalohead, Priscilla; Sterner, Michele
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ABSTRACT

The Indian Education Program in the Osseo School District (Minnesota) serves approximately 200 American Indian students in grades K-12 from 27 schools and a variety of tribes. The Program's intergenerational approach reflects tribal traditions in that generations learn together and grandparents, parents, and students are involved in the decision-making process. In addition to weekly and monthly culture classes, postsecondary preparation activities, and advocacy, the Program has created a number of family-based after-school, weekend, and summer activities. Traditional tribal seeds are used in a garden managed by parents and students. Another Program feature is a craft business, where Indian elders, and community members, and parents teach students to make traditional Indian crafts items that are sold at vendor booths, pow-wows, and craft fairs. Students have created a Web page and catalogue for the business. Entire families are involved in drum, dance, and language classes taught by Elders and other community members with knowledge and understanding of their tribal culture and heritage. Field trips familiarize students with Indian cultural history and postsecondary education. A parent and student-run newsletter keeps the community informed about Program offerings. The Program's success is based upon several factors that can be duplicated in other programs. Staff, parents, and students agree to work toward common valued goals. Staff are hired who understand how to locate funding, work with Indian community members, and recruit those who have valuable cultural knowledge and skills to share. Program staff members and parents learn how to collaborate with representatives from other community programs with similar goals. The ideas of all participants are valued and put into action. (TD)

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INDIAN EDUCATION: AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH

By

Priscilla Buffalohead and Michele Sterner

The Indian Education Program in the Osseo Area Schools serves approximately 200 American Indian students, grades kindergarten through twelve, who attend twenty-seven different schools in the district. These students represent a variety of tribal backgrounds. Seventy per cent are Ojibwe from reservations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and North Dakota; fifteen per cent are Dakota or Lakota; and the remaining ten per cent are Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Yuchi, Pawnee, Otoe, Mohawk, Comanche, Cheyenne, Carrier, Washoe, Potawatomi, Ho-chunk (Winnebago), Powhatan, and Apache.

The Osseo School District is the fifth largest in the state of Minnesota with a student population of approximately 22,000. The district boundaries include several communities located in the northwest suburbs of Minneapolis. These communities include inner and outer ring suburbs as well as established rural communities. The ethnic composition of the district is sharply split between what district personnel refer to as the east and west sides. East Side schools include up to 50% minority enrollment while West Side schools are predominantly white.

In response to concerns of Indian parents, the Osseo School District created an American Indian Parent Advisory Committee in 1990. The committee and the district then sought state and federal funding to better serve Indian students. For the first few years, program staff included on half-time position and occasionally one full time position when funding was available. In the fall of 1995, two new staff members were hired and the program began to grow. Creative ideas and excellent proposal writing skills led to financial stability for the program.

The Indian Education staff who came together in 1995 faced the awesome task of creating a sense of community where none had previously existed. Then, as well as today, American Indian students in the

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district attend several different schools, come from different tribes, live in different communities in the district, and come to the program with widely varying amounts of connection to and knowledge of their tribal heritage. The first step in developing a sense of community, the Parent Committee and staff agreed, was the creation of a common mission for the program that all parties could agree upon. The Indian Parent Advisory Committee, after much discussion, came up with the following mission statement: "The purpose of the Indian Education program is to empower Indian students and their families to enhance their educational potential through special, unique, and culturally related educational programming". This mission statement reflects three key values: the importance of our children, the importance of education, and the importance of American Indian culture and heritage.

As the staff brainstormed program ideas, it became apparent that best approach for delivering educational services to this unique community is an intergenerational approach. In all tribal traditions, education took place in family and community environments where generations of families taught and learned together. The staff therefore decided that even though school programs separate generations based on age, our programs would include whole families. Program staff also realized that grandparents, parents, and students had to be actively involved in the decision making process. Their ideas also had to be carried out in concrete ways so they could see their ideas actually blossom.

Osseo's Indian Education Program offers services to all Indian students in the district in the form of weekly and monthly culture classes, post-secondary preparation activities, and advocacy. In addition, the staff and Parent Committee have created a number of family-based after school, weekend, and summer activities. One of these projects is the Native Youth Garden. After the staff proposed the idea, the school district found land that could be used for gardening. For the past two years, in late spring, Indian families have come together to plant seeds that are part of the original stock of seeds used by American Indian gardeners for generations. Among several other varieties, the seeds include Omaha Pumpkin, Moves Slowly

Sunflower, and Wild Goose Beans. Parents and students plant these traditional Native crops in hills as our ancestors did. The students have chosen the phrase, Three Sisters, to label the food crop sections of the garden. The name is derived from the Iroquois phrase for corn, beans, and squash. The fourth, and final section of the garden is called the Healing Garden. This section is dedicated to healing plants our ancestors used to treat the sick both spiritually and physically. The Healing Garden includes, among other plants, Prairie Sage, Sweet Grass, Sweet Flag (Muskrat Food), and varieties of Coneflower.

As news of the Indian Education garden project spread, program staff began to get requests to share seeds. The program has shared gardening ideas and seeds with the Upper Sioux Community in Western Minnesota, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in Northeastern Minnesota, and with NAES College students and staff on the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin. In return for these seeds, the Menominee shared their 1000-year-old squash seeds with Osseo's program. American Indian families in the district not only plant the garden each year, but also water, weed, and harvest the plants throughout the summer. The most recent development in the garden project has been the creation of a video so our vision of a Native Youth Garden can be shared with others.

Another feature of Osseo's Indian Education Program is an American Indian student run business enterprise called Little Buffalo Crafts. For the past five years, the students have created a number of authentic traditional craft items. The students sell these items at vendor booths during Indian Education Conferences, at pow-wows and craft fairs in the Twin Cities Indian Community, and at school events. The students earn points for making crafts and selling them. They also earn points for attending Saturday mentorship sessions throughout the year. These sessions are led by Indian Elders, Indian community members, and parents who teach the students how to make particular items. One parent, a member of the Carrier Nation of British Columbia, taught the students how to make baby moccasins out of moose hide. Carrier Elders provided the moose hide to the program. The mentors have been a valuable part of the

business because community Elders, artisans, and parents who become involved in the program promote the students in the larger Indian community. The vendor booth business has also linked the students and their families with a network of Native people throughout the state.

The students who participate in Little Buffalo Crafts earn a paycheck every few months. The amount of money they earn is based on the number of points they have accumulated from participating in mentorships, making crafts, and selling at vendor booths. With the help of a district technology consultant, five of the students worked for eight weeks to create a business Web Page on the Internet. Other students helped to create a business catalog. Some of the participating students have put their earnings into a college fund. Others take guitar lessons. Still others are able to buy presents for their parents and grandparents. Participating students have learned a wide variety of hands on skills: creating art and craft products, carrying out basic principles of organizing and running a business, developing public relations skills, and learning the fundamentals of Web Page design. Parents are actively involved in the student business as well. They serve as mentors, transport the students to various vendor locations, look for marketing opportunities, and occasionally sell for the students during school hours.

Entire families are involved as well in the drum and dance classes, and Ojibwe and Dakota language classes sponsored by the program. These classes are taught by Elders and other community members with knowledge and understanding of their tribal culture and heritage. Parents and students have the opportunity to learn pow-wow songs, drumming, fancy dance, and traditional dance. Parents often work on dance outfits for their children during class. The classes culminate in a pow-wow held during the spring of the year. District families particularly appreciate the language classes. There are few family members who know how to speak their Native language. Because the classes are offered to entire families, family members can practice the language together at home. The drum and dance teachers and language teachers

have also become stakeholders in the program because their unique skills are utilized and appreciated. They subsequently promote the Osseo Indian Education Program in the larger community.

In addition to these culturally based educational experiences open to all Indian families of the district, the secondary program offers an overnight camping field trip to secondary students and their parents. These trips culminate in visits to historical sites in Minnesota relating to Ojibwe and Dakota history. The students and parents really enjoy this opportunity as many of the students have never before experienced overnight camping and exploring greater Minnesota. Also open to secondary students is the opportunity to explore post-secondary education. The Indian Education program offers four field trips a year for students and parents to visit and learn more about college and university life. The experience has been a wonderful opportunity for both the students and their parents. The college trips have even motivated some parents to go back and earn their own college degree.

The most recent offering of the Indian Education Program came about as an idea from parents. Some parents and students wanted to take a class about Indian history and culture. Since one staff member had already taught at the college level, she agreed to facilitate this class and research the possibility of offering it for college credit. NAES (Native American Educational Services) College-Twin Cities, agreed to sponsor the course. Because many of the families who were interested did not have the funds to pay for college credit, the staff at NAES College and Osseo's Indian Education Program wrote a grant to the Two Feathers Fund of the St. Paul Foundation. This grant covered the cost of processing college credits, books, and other materials. The staff then sought a location for the class than would not be intimidating, because for most of the participants, this class would be their first college experience. The class ended up being taught at the home of one of the parents. Comfortable chairs, coffee, and desert added to the classroom atmosphere. Nineteen grandparents, parents, high school and junior high students signed up for the eight-week course.

Eighteen participants finished the course. These students now have two college credits. This approach proved to be another effective way for parents and students to experience post-secondary education together.

To keep all American Indian parents and students in the district informed about program offerings and achievements, the Indian Education Program publishes a newsletter three times a year (Fall, Winter, and Spring). This newsletter has proved to be an effective instrument for reaching both the Indian community and the local educational community. The newsletter includes recurring articles about Indian tribes, cultural lesson plans, college information, web site news, individual student achievement, biographies, and book reviews. Parents and students also write articles for the newsletter periodically about famous Indian ancestors and other pertinent subjects.

The success of Osseo's Indian Education Program is based upon a number of factors that can be duplicated in other programs. First, a solid agreement needs to be reached between staff, parents, and students to work toward common valued goals. Second, successful programs depend on hiring staff who understand how to locate funding at the national, state, and private foundation level so that programs have a funding base for several years. Staff members also need to understand how to work with Indian community member, and recognize and recruit those who have valuable cultural knowledge and other skills to share with the program. Third, staff and parents need to learn how to network in the community to find other programs that have similar goals. Collaboration with these programs can enhance individual program offerings. Finally, a successful Indian Education Program is a flexible one, where the ideas of all participants are valued and where these ideas are carried out.

Michele Sterner serves as the American Indian Culture and Language Teacher for the Osseo School District. She is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Priscilla Buffalohead is the Indian Education Culture Specialist for the district. She is the author of a number of curriculum units and articles about American Indian history and culture.